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BOOK REVIEWS

Religion Explained? The Cognitive Science of Religion After Twenty-Five Years, edited by Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe. Bloomsbury Academic 2017. 272pp., 6 B&W illustrations. Hb \$114.00. ISBN-13: 9781350032477.

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The book *Religion Explained? The Cognitive Science of Religion After Twenty-Five Years* presents papers by the leading scholars in the field. Though the papers are grouped into four sections—Retrospectives, State of the Art, CSR 2.0 and Looking Forward—most authors discuss all of these issues. Instead of discussing each paper individually, I will give a thematic overview of the book.

Retrospectives

Three contributors can make a claim to having written the first book or article in CSR (Cognitive Science of Religion). The title of the book sides with E. Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley who published *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* in 1990 (Lawson and McCauley 1990). Sometimes Stewart Guthrie's paper "A Cognitive Theory of Religion" (1980) is considered the first on the subject. A number of contributors argue that the history of CSR goes (much) further back. Lawson points to the cognitive revolution in the social sciences. He reiterates McCauley's and his own well-known criticism of other approaches in the social sciences where the idea that only social factors can explain other social factors was (and is) dominant. McCauley also laments the idiosyncratic tendencies in other approaches. He also points to theories on cultural evolution and evolutionary psychology as important predecessors of CSR. A few contributors mention Dan Sperber's work theory of cultural epidemiology as a core insight for CSR.

Two contributors trace CSR's history much further back. Justin Lane discusses CSR's deep history in late nineteenth century theories about memory and perception. He also highlights the influence of mid-twentieth century theories about language. Steven Hrotic discusses the deep history of CSR in Victorian theories about evolutionism and cognitive anthropology.

There are arguably much more influences on CSR that are not discussed in the volume. The authors rightly point out that an adequate understanding of CSR-theories requires knowledge about older theories in (cognitive) science.

The authors are, however, not always clear about how the older theories influenced CSR.

State of the Art

Only a few contributors are not enthusiastic about the current state of CSR. Benson Saler and Charles Ziegler are the most critical. They survey the criticism Ara Norenzayan's book "Big Gods. How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict" received (see Norenzayan 2013). They claim that the book suffers from "physics envy," a tendency to portray theories as resembling theories in exact sciences as much as possible. Leonardo Ambasciano raises a methodological worry of some CSR-research. He claims that some CSR-scholars are guilty of biased selection of variables and control groups with the goal of confirming their initial hypotheses. Stewart Guthrie argues that two strands of research in CSR are in conflict. One strand states that religious beliefs are intuitive (Guthrie's own theory of animism is a prime example, see Guthrie 1993). A second strand states that religious belief is counterintuitive (here Guthrie refers to Pascal Boyer's theory [2002]).

A problem to which a number of contributors return is the problem of defining the explanandum of CSR, i.e. "religion." Harvey Whitehouse makes a case for deconstructing "religion" into various building blocks that should be studied separately. Guthrie argues that the lack of clarity about the explanandum is a problem that should be overcome. Justin Barrett proposes a pragmatic solution to the problem and proposes to define 'religion' as cultural expressions that are commonly regarded as religious.

Most others are enthusiastic about CSR's current state. Some survey the achievements of CSR and arrive at lists of established theories that CSR has produced. McCauley lists theological correctness (Barrett 1999), promiscuous telology (Kelemen 1999), dead agent's minds (Bering, Blasi and Bjorklund 2005) and minimally counterintuitive concepts (Boyer 2002). Uffe Schjodt and Armin Geertz list epidemiology of representations (Sperber and Caton 1996), animism (see Guthrie 1993), hyperactive agency detection device (see Barrett 2004), ritual representations (see Lawson and McCauley 1990), counterintuitive ideas (see Boyer 2002) and modes of religiosity (see Whitehouse 2004). Barrett discusses some core commitments of CSR and lists methodological naturalism, interdisciplinarity and a focus on cognition.

Apart from a few contributors, most are thus positive about CSR's current state. It is clear though that some problems will need to be overcome. The apparent lack of unanimity about the discipline's explanandum is a clear example. I missed more discussion on how various CSR-theories can be integrated or combined. Having a proliferation of theories is one thing, working towards a unified explanation is another.

CSR 2.0

Throughout the book there is general agreement that CSR should move towards more interdisciplinarity. Schjodt and Geertz argue interdisciplinarity is needed to gain respectability in the humanities. Hrotic also stresses the importance of interdisciplinarity. Michael Porubanova and John Shaver's paper gives an example of how interdisciplinarity can work out. They discuss how psychological theories of emotional salience can improve Pascal Boyer's theory of minimally counterintuitive concepts.

A number of contributors see interdisciplinarity as a way of bridging the gap between current CSR-theories and particular historical religious phenomena. Pascal Boyer and Nicolas Baumard introduce the problem. They note that there appears to be some difficulty to see how CSR-theories about general human cognitive mechanisms and their outputs can shed light on, or can be reconciled with, particular historical religious phenomena. Panayotis Pachis and Olympia Panagiotidou note the same tension and call for more collaboration with scholars in the history of religions to overcome it. Anders Klostergaard Petersen discusses this very problem in the study of magic. Leonardo Ambisciano even criticizes current CSR-theories for not doing justice to historical, particular religions. Jesper Sorensen proposes a solution. He proposes to consider historical, particular religious traditions as ways in which humans modify their particular ecological niches by using their cognitive tools as discussed in CSR-theories. For Barrett, the problem is above all about how to combine individual features of religion with group-features.

Unfortunately, most contributors remain vague about how interdisciplinary research can help move CSR forward and help to bridge the divide with (the study of) particular historical religious traditions.

Looking Forward

Apart from calling for more interdisciplinary work, some contributors offer friendly advice for CSR as a discipline. Richard Sosis argues that CSR should learn from the (bad) example of behavioral ecology and the (good) example of evolutionary psychology. The former saw a wide proliferation of scientific societies and journals but no significant increase in quality. The latter focuses on quality. As a result, evolutionary psychology is in much better shape than behavioral ecology. Sosis suggests following this example and urges CSR to focus on quality in research.

Schjodt and Geertz give a warning. They note that although CSR has matured, it still consists of a rather small group of scholars who had better stick together to stand up to other dominant approaches in religious studies.

Conclusion

The book shows that CSR is a discipline that does not shy away from self-reflection and is willing to take a critical look at itself. The book presupposes familiarity with CSR and is therefore not appropriate as an introductory book. For those familiar with CSR, it offers new perspectives and new issues to be investigated. The book probably raises more questions than it answers but this is not surprising since CSR is still quite young.

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